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ABSTRACT

Because of problem behavior in society ranging from impoliteness to violence, character education for students has become a relevant topic. This paper asserts that character education for elementary students can be useful and discusses implementation of character education. The paper suggests that teachers should choose worthwhile goals for such education, provide appropriate learning opportunities, and evaluate progress. The section "Objectives of Character Education" discusses the importance of having students work in groups and how to achieve this. The section "Standards in Education" reminds educators that because of students' multiple intelligences, student progress should be evaluated in multiple ways. The section "Teaching Values" argues against exhortations and extrinsic inducements in favor of methods that teach self-control and learner involvement. The paper concludes that character education should be an inherent part of school curriculum. Contains 13 references. (EV)

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ED 420 393

CHARACTER EDUCATION AND THE ELEMENTARY CURRICULUM

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Educators bring up the importance of character education periodically in articles written and speeches given at teacher education conventions. They believe that pupils need to develop well in the moral as well as academic dimensions. There are major problems in society today such as drug abuse, gang membership, intoxication, teenage pregnancy, violence, dishonesty, and other forms of disruptive behavior. There are also problems of impoliteness, rudeness, lack of patience, and unconcern for others that also indicate character education is important for pupils.

Based on problems in society, educators may establish worthwhile goals for pupil attainment. These goals should stress knowledge, skills, and attitudinal ends. Appropriate balance among these three kinds of objectives need to be emphasized in teaching and learning. Learning opportunities need to be chosen which guide pupils to achieve objectives. The learning opportunities need to be interesting for pupils and stress active learner involvement. Individual differences need adequate provision so that each pupil may achieve as much as possible in character education. Pupil motivation and optimal progress are important in the character education curriculum.

Evaluation procedures need to be selected which will assist pupils to achieve in the arena of character education. The evaluation procedures should not be separated from the objectives and learning opportunities. Thus what are evaluated as being deficiencies in character now become a part of the new objectives. To achieve the new objectives, pupils need to experience diverse learning opportunities.

Objectives of Character Education

A part of character education, but not all of it, involves having pupils work in groups. Teachers and principals have a salient responsibility in determining the best approach in grouping pupils for instruction whereby each learner achieves optimally. If, for example, pupils are working on a committee of three to five members, there are

PS 026553

selected criteria which need to be followed. These criteria may be developed cooperatively by pupils with teacher guidance and consist of standards such as the following: 1. each pupil respecting the thinking of others. 2. all participating but no one dominating the group. 3. pupils staying on the topic and not digressing from the task at hand. 4. each pupil doing his/her fair share of the work in the committee. 5. pupils need to be involved in appraising the quality of work done during and after a project has been completed. 6. standards for evaluation need to be clear and specific. 7. results from the evaluation process should be used in improving work performed within the committee setting. 8. effort put forth should be maximal for each pupil.

There are numerous recommended procedures in grouping pupils for instruction. Each has its pros and cons. Educators and parents need to study and analyze each method of grouping pupils for instruction. A well informed constituency in terms of how pupils may be placed into groups for teaching and learning is necessary. A plan must be implemented which provides for each pupil to learn as much as possible. The plan or plans of grouping chosen need to be based on a sound philosophy of instruction. Rigid approaches must be avoided since flexibility is a key term when thinking of how learners should be grouped for instruction. Thus teachers and principals need to have an open mind in terms of how learners should be grouped so that each pupil can attain as much as possible in the school curriculum (Ediger,1996).

There are definite issues involved in implementing committee endeavors. Should pupils choose which committee, among alternatives, to work on or should the teacher assign at least some of the committee members? Should committee membership be based on interests of individual learners or should the talents of members be considered so that quality in a finished product is in evidence? What is the role of the teacher when pupils work on committee endeavors? How can positive attitudes be developed within pupils when collaborative endeavors are in evidence? In reviewing research pertaining to group work, Burk (1996) wrote:

...Acquaintance pairs in which one partner possessed a higher popularity status than the other tended to benefit least from the experience. The friendship/popularity effect was even more pronounced with pairs of children who began the task with the same understanding as the balance. Acquaintances with a similar understanding of the tasks were more likely to learn if their partner's popularity status was different from their own. Why would popularity status have an influence on learning? Just as friendships evolve within the larger social world, children develop views of their classmates, whether or not they are friends with them. Popularity status is influenced by the number of friends a person has, but not by the intensity of those friendships. It may also be influenced by such things as stability, physical attractiveness, and reputation... Popularity status may also affect the equal footing within the relationship that allows for greater cooperation. Because children may be friends with others whose popularity status is similar or different from their own, the two constructs must both be considered.

We as teachers need to facilitate the development of a psychologically safe environment that promotes positive social interaction. As children interact positively with their peers, they learn more about others as individuals, and they begin building a history of interactions. Some interactions will be very positive and develop into lasting friendships. Others will not, but an atmosphere of acceptance and respect in the classroom will help them see each other as equal members of their social world.

The influence of friendship and popularity on learning is not well understood...If we focus our attention on cognitive development without consideration for the social realm, we may inhibit development of both realms. The common practice of not allowing friends to work together on projects is, therefore, open to question. Children need experience working with their friends as well as with acquaintances, who are potential friends. By recognizing and appreciating children's relationships, teachers show additional respect for children as members of the social world (Burk, 1996).

Pupils need to have diverse opportunities to work with pupils of all races, creeds, and beliefs. There must be respect for others as an important criterion for quality character development. Daniel Goleman has done considerable work and research in emotional intelligence. He indicates five areas of emotional intelligence. The first is self awareness. Here, the pupil needs to know personal strengths and weaknesses in handling emotions. Pupils should understand feelings possessed and personal options possessed. Second, pupils should learn how to handle emotions. Management of impulsive behavior and how to handle emotions is at the heart of emotional intelligence. Third, high emotional intelligence stresses being a motivated person who is reaching toward achieving definite goals in life. Fourth, empathy and feeling for and with others stresses a humane person. Reading another's feelings is at the heart of empathy. Fifth, individuals need to possess social skills in order to get along well with others. Too frequently, people lose out in life due to a lack of social skills. Working harmoniously with other people may then become difficult and costly (Pool, 1997).

Standards in Education

National and state standards for pupils to achieve are advocated strongly by selected educators as well as by state and federal legislators. These standards are worked out, prior to instruction, so that all pupils ideally should achieve them. Uniformity of learners and their characteristics might well then be an end result. And yet, people are different from each other in so many ways. Should uniformity be emphasized among pupils in achievement? Should each one achieve as optimally as possible in what are called the basics? Seemingly, the Theory of Multiple Intelligences emphasizes that individuals are different from each other in numerous ways. Dr. Howard Gardner (1993), strong advocate of the multiple intelligence theory, believes that too frequently teachers stress verbal/linguistic intelligence as well as logical/mathematical intelligence in working with and teaching children. There are numerous additional ways for pupils to reveal what has been

learned. Thus the following intelligences should also be stressed in teaching and learning: visual/spatial, musical, bodily/kinesthetic, interpersonal, and intrapersonal. Dr. Gardner further divides intelligence into three component parts. These are intelligence referring to one's psychological and biological makeup; domain referring to one's talents, or craft being used in society; field referring to what the societal arena believes to be important in terms of processes and products. Individuals then should have ample opportunities to reveal what has been learned in a variety of ways. More positive feelings should be an end result wherein pupils may indicate how they wish to indicate achievement from learning.

Teaching Values

How should values be taught within the framework of character education? Traditionally, a teacher might have lectured to the pupil as to what are acceptable values and what are not acceptable. Today, exhortations and extrinsic inducements, such as giving prizes for desired behaviors might be thought of by some as being character education. Students are to be drilled on what is perceived as quality behavior. Indoctrination attempts are used heavily. Instead pupils should engage in depth learning with critical reflection on values and what is worthwhile. Rewarding good behavior also has its downside. The more good behavior is rewarded, the less interest there is in being good. If a child is rewarded for being good, the less likely these pupils think of themselves as being caring individuals. He/she starts to believe that good deeds are done merely to receive rewards. Worse than rewards are awards pupils receive for quality behavior. These plaques, certificates, and trophies become objects to compete for rather than doing good to show concern for others. Character education has rested on the beliefs of behaviorism, conservatism, and religion traditionally. Instead, there can be class meetings to indicate sharing, caring, planning, and reflecting. There should be activities in which pupils explore how others might perceive a situation different from the involved committee. Literature as content provides opportunities for

pupils to look at diverse perceptions of ideas. Instead of telling pupils who the hero(s) are, pupils may decide what is heroic. If pupils do not participate well in discussions, reasons for this happening need to be discussed and a different approach implemented. Negative behaviors such as lying and stealing need to be worked out in context. Problems need to be solved from the inside out, that is from within the classroom problems need identification and solutions sought. Children's needs must be met in order to develop caring communities (Kohn, 1997).

Hilda Taba (1970) developed a strategy in having pupils learn vital concepts. This approach may work well in having pupils learn to understand and apply principles of tolerance. Thus, for example, pupils may be asked to brainstorm what is meant by "discrimination." After brainstorming for a period of time with the responses printed on the chalkboard, pupils are asked to combine those ideas on the chalkboard that are similar. Next pupils are to label the different sets of ideas presented after the combining activity has been completed. After reflecting upon what makes for "discrimination," pupils write summaries on their thinking and share these results with classmates. Conceptual understanding and thinking skills are being emphasized. The teacher needs to observe how pupils' deeds change after using Taba's grouping of concepts approach. By reflecting and thinking about discrimination," for example, pupils might have changed their behaviors in working with others (White, 1995).

Developmentally responsive middle level schools provide assessment and evaluation that promote learning. The National Middle School Association (NMSA) urges educators to shift their focus from merely measuring and judging student progress to using assessment and evaluation to promote learning. Unfortunately, many current practices in schools at all levels actually impede learning, and middle schools are no exception. Conventional competitive assessment, evaluation, and marking turn students into "grade junkies," who demand ABC marks or "points" for everything they do. Popular incentive programs in which students win prizes for just showing up in school further aggravate the "pay me" attitude that permeates our

contemporary culture...

In contrast, the NMSA position paper advocates practices that foster student self control and acceptance of responsibility for one's actions. It is this kind of character and integrity, plus an inner directed lifelong thirst for learning, that young people must have to become to become fully functioning citizens in our democratic society. Self-motivated students will learn, not only basic knowledge and skills and habits of mind, but also the critical thinking skills and habits of mind required to deal with our rapidly changing world.

To accomplish this, the NMSA position paper states: "Middle level students need to participate in all phases of assessment and evaluation, helping to set individual and group goals, identifying ways to measure progress, and evaluating their own accomplishments...This approach would appear to be contrary to all the current emphasis on externally-imposed standards and assessment (Vars, 1997).

Intrinsic motivation then is the key to having pupils achieve well in cognition and in character education. Learners need to be involved in all facets of curriculum development.

Simon, Howe, and Kirchenbaum (1973) emphasized values clarification exercises for pupils with teacher guidance to engage in; pupils learned to practice making choices, from among alternatives. One excellent strategy stressed pupils dividing a sheet of paper into six parts, each represented a part of a coat of arms for the learner. Each of the six parts was to have a response from the pupil based on a strategy from the handbook <u>Values Clarification: A Handbook of Practical Strategies for Teachers and Students.</u> I will mention two questions whereby pupils would fill in with answers in the coat of arms: 1. If you had six months left to live, what would you do? 2.What would you want to have people say about you after your death? Questions raised from the handbook and each answered by pupils fills in all six parts of the coat of arms. Pupils are to ponder and reflect upon vital questions and think about possible answers. After the exercise has been completed, pupils may share answers voluntarily. Others may

then see what has been salient to a pupil in terms of values.

Brown and Varady (1997) emphasize examining the writings of Dr. Suess to promote character development. They stress pupils reading and discussing the following books, among others, for facets of character development: 1. Horton Hatches the Egg. Here, Horton lives by his promises to sit on the egg until it hatches. Gertrude Mc Fuzz had started setting on the egg until it hatched, but decided she wanted to vacation at different enjoyable places instead. 2. Yertle, the Turtle and other stories. Here, Yertle, the turtle desires a larger and larger kingdom to rule by being on top of many turtles in a vertical arrangement. His dreams of empire collapsed when a turtle sneezed underneath the heap, causing the "empire" to collapse.

Although teachers may believe that initiating values discussion would ultimately involve more instructional time that simply is not available, a willingness to engage in progressive alterations in instructional and curricular design will allow teachers more opportunities for dealing with critical concerns of young adolescents. One such alteration involves renewed reading of Dr.Suess's books. These books may not be viewed initially as favored reading material by either middle school students nor their teachers. However, Dr.,. Suess' ability to address meaningful and personal topics through the symbolism of his imaginary characters allows readers to examine the hidden agenda with many social and emotional issues... (Brown and Varady, 1997).

In Conclusion

Character development should definitely be a salient part of the curriculum. I believe that unless one possesses strong traits of morality and character, there is little of value within the human being. In society, people do act in a lawless manner with violent behavior. Even with a lack of politeness and with abrasive behavior, situations become unenjoyable and untenable. Certainly, standards of behavior in school and in society can be improved upon. I believe character education may assist in improving behavior in groups as well as individually.

There are numerous issues in society which need solution. These are ethical issues: abortion, euthanasia, capitol punishment, sex roles and sexual identity, discrimination and reverse discrimination, sexual morality, pornography and censorship,economic justice and welfare, world hunger, war and nuclear deterrence, use of the environment, and animal rights, among others (Mappes and Zembaty, 1992). What kinds of decisions should be made pertaining to each of these issues in order that character development is optimalized? These are indeed difficult decisions to make. But, decisions and choices must be made. Character education should be an inherent part of the school curriculum (Ediger, 1995).

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